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Circulation of Images, from Recognition to Erasure: An Artist's Response

Xie Lei

Artist

Abstract

This article revolves around my practice, as an artist, which has an essential link with images and their circulation. In a subtle way, painting offers me a language allowing me to explore the polysemy of the chosen image, to experience a vocabulary both figurative and abstract. My practice could choose and process “ordinary” images, which are diffused but whose diffusion does not alter the subject, and has no consequence on the latter. It can also retain images whose strength is intrinsic to their circulation, to their popularization, to their controversy, images which will however ultimately generate paintings, and simultaneously erasing this circulation.

Résumé

Ma pratique artistique a un lien essentiel avec les images, leur circulation. Par sa subtilité, la peinture m'offre un langage me permettant d'explorer la polysémie de l'image retenue, de manier un vocabulaire à la lisière de l'abstraction et de la figuration. Ma pratique peut choisir et traiter des images « ordinaires », diffusées mais dont la diffusion n'altère pas le sujet, est sans conséquence sur ce dernier. Elle peut aussi retenir des images dont la force est intrinsèque à leur circulation, à leur popularisation, à leur controverse, images qui généreront pourtant *in fine* des tableaux effaçant cette circulation.

Xie Lei is an artist, born in China, lives and works in Paris since 2006; currently member of French Academy in Madrid and in residency at the Casa de Velázquez. He received his PhD (practice-based) in visual arts in 2016 from the Ecole normale supérieure and Beaux-Arts de Paris. His work is included in public and private collections, such as MAC VAL and Burger Collection.

You and I live in a world of images. In this incessant, rapid, and planetary circulation of images, I have selected some of which I do not use to create new images but as stimulus for making paintings. Paintings are far away from the images which have served as a starting point, as well as being distant from the literal definition of an image: “the exact or analog reproduction of a being, of a thing” (from *Le Robert* dictionary).

This essay will revolve around my practice, its essential link with the images, the protocol that I established for their selection, for their treatment, their reconstruction, and their erasure. The particularity of an image may appeal to me, but I quickly forget it to attach myself to the universal that it can evoke. However, do I have the right to be interested in all images, to use those, which are external to my native culture? I will ask this question at the end of my essay, since some people, and artists in particular, want to restrict the circulation of images to their community alone, since this community would be the sole holder, exclusive of a legitimate identity to understand these images and their handling.

Out of conviction, I chose painting. Its richness and vast possibilities open the way for a language translating my sensitive universe by experiencing a vocabulary that is both figurative and abstract. Painting is an adventure for me. I seek to practice it in a subtle way to deal with subjects that question our world, our societies. Using a medium rich in such a long history also challenges me in contemporary times. In the digital age, with instant and globalized communication via the internet and social media, I believe that painting stands out by offering another perception of time. It can be beneficial to slow the gaze, to escape the intoxication of acceleration and immediacy.

It may be paradoxical to say this today, when health barriers require us to use the internet more, so we are very fortunate that it exists! But this transient state does not change my mind and position, as I do not practice painting as a resistance in the current era, in the digital age. On the contrary, I want to combine it with this time to show even more clearly its singularity. Thus, the quasi “ghostly” appearance

of the subject through the painting has always intrigued me, like the light that manages to pass through the painting, giving a filmic sensation or an electric effect. I regard these effects as an analogy of the digital image that emerges from a screen.

Many of my paintings refer to the anxiety that everyone might feel about the justification of their existence, the quest for identity, the awareness of their vulnerability. The violence of the world in which we live leads me to paintings which deal with fear, desire, and horror, to images of an insatiable human madness, dialectical between an agonizing reality and an imagination which is just as much so.

These existential questions are asked through my native culture, which led me to consider interactions and tensions in order to overcome dualism. As an extension of Taoism, my research led me, in the West, to the French expression “*Entre Chien et Loup* (Between Dog and Wolf)”, that time of day when the decline of light prevents us to distinguish the protective dog from the threatening wolf, where security faces danger, the known is measured by the unknown. Evidence fades. Doubt, confusion of images and meaning settle. The Latin *Inter canem et lupum*, which has no equivalent in Chinese, has become mine, opening the way from reality to metaphor, to allegories, leading me to poetics of strangeness.

In the flow of images, I select one which will act as a stimulus. It can be an “ordinary” image of banality, diffused, but whose diffusion does not alter the subject, whose circulation is without consequence on the latter. It can also be photographs that I took myself, private images that did not circulate at the time. My selection can also retain images whose strength is intrinsic to their circulation, images that - if I can say - everyone has seen. Images which will nevertheless generate paintings erasing this circulation. After the choice, a process of reflection begins where the image is deconstructed, then reconstructed, where a composition is put in place. Painting offers me the means of a language, allowing me to explore the polysemy of the chosen image. Ultimately, the painting is far from the chosen image.



Figure 1. Xie Lei, *Blow*, 2011, oil on canvas, 44,6 x 55,4 cm, Burger Collection, Zürich/Hong Kong.

As examples of the two categories of images that I have just mentioned, I will now present a selection of nine paintings made in the last ten years. I will not comment on these paintings but only show how the initial image and its circulation intervened differently.

Blow (Fig. 1) comes from an image found by chance in a first aid manual. A standard image of *mode d'emploi*. But the mouth-to-mouth saving was for me the reminiscence of a legend told in China to children to frighten them: “Never sleep with your mouth open; a ghost will come to suck your soul.” The viewer does not need to know either first aid or the Chinese legend.

For the following two paintings, there is not one single source image. In both cases, it is rather a crystallization of several images colliding in my

memories: an image memory, a mental image, in a way. *Expose* (Fig. 2), for instance, does not come from an image of a self-immolation by fire, but relates to images that my memory has preserved or constructed from shamanism, voodoo. In *Exchange* (Fig. 3), the stratification of images, those of Roman statues memorized for this diptych, reflects the way my life has always led me to interrogate the issue of identity, the appearance of identity.

For *Conceal* (Fig. 4), the source image is a photograph I took of a friend of mine, who is French and has lived in China for decades. It is a private image—private here in its double sense. An ordinary portrait, a normal face. I finished this painting just before the lockdown in Paris, but after the Covid-19 alert had been given in China.

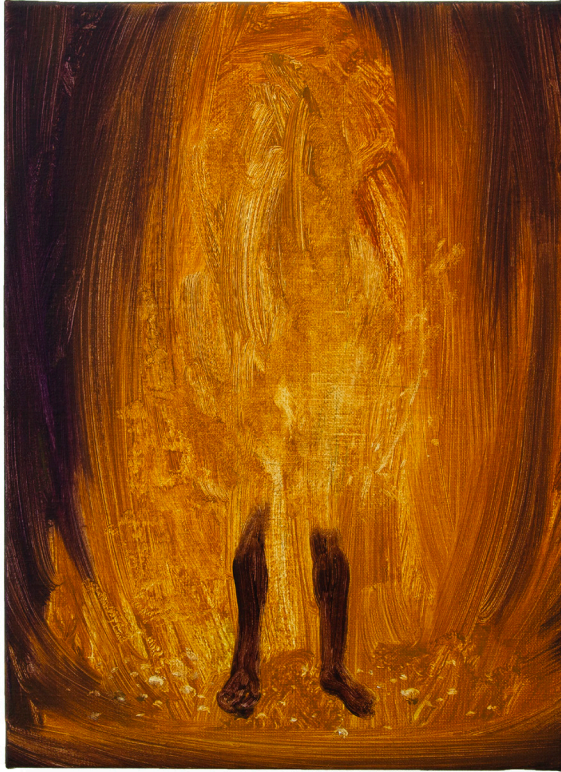


Figure 2. Xie Lei, *Expose*, 2019, oil on canvas, 33 x 24 cm, Galerie Meessen de Clercq, Brussels.



Figure 4. Xie Lei, *Conceal*, 2020, oil on panel, 33 x 24 cm.



Figure 3. Xie Lei, *Exchange*, 2016, oil on canvas, diptych, each 40 x 40 cm.



Figure 5. Xie Lei, *The Thriver*, 2018-2019, oil on canvas, 4 paintings, 50 x 40 cm, 33 x 24 cm.

Unlike the four previous paintings, *The Thriver* (Fig. 5) was spurred by an image I found in a newspaper that went around the world and was relayed by social networks. It is that of soccer player Mesut Özil praying during matches. The support displayed by the German player, of Turkish origin, to President Erdogan who is a candidate for his re-election, has heightened the controversy and the weight of the image. As the set of four paintings progressed in my studio, the background of the image faded away and finally stopped bothering me. The ambiguous gesture and the moment of prayer prevailed over the direct impact of an image and its temporality. Does the viewer need to know the challenges of this temporality?

Likewise, images of migrants and their journeys by boat to Europe have swept the planet from 2015. But who had never before seen the image of a boat overloaded with passengers fleeing poverty? For me, it is a tragedy that spans centuries. In *Challenge* (Fig. 6), I wanted to detach myself from the breaking news.

I was still living in Beijing in 2003 and was marked by the trauma of SARS. When the images of the Fukushima disaster appeared eight years later and its repercussions on daily life of the Japanese, I immediately thought back to SARS, from my personal and private experience. *Make A Line* reflects this (Fig. 7).

In *Touching The Shadow* (Fig. 8), more than fifteen thousand people bathe in this outdoor swimming pool in Sichuan province, an image which has also been world-widely circulated to highlight the

crowds in China, as well as to show the happiness of summer. The reversal, the possible tilting of life towards disaster, of joy towards anxiety, interested me more.

Before I reflect on my freedom to be able, as an artist, to use all the images that circulate, here is a last example, an example of the barbarism that we thought was extinguished after the Inquisition. In 2015, Daesh burned alive, in a cage, a captured Jordanian pilot. These images were broadcast around the world. This is *Vanishing* (Fig. 9), a diptych from unbearable images.

Similarly unbearable images of the body of the young Emmett Till, which started circulating sixty years ago, served as the starting point for Dana Schutz's painting *Open Casket*, produced in 2016 and which sparked a controversy over the circulation and appropriation of such images.

In his book, *Plaidoyer Pour l'Universel*, Francis Wolff described "We know we are exposed to the same planetary risks: epidemics, global warming, nuclear disaster, depletion of natural resources, extinction of species, global economic crisis and so on. But as it imposes itself on the consciousness, the unity of humanity recedes in collective representations. The same identity folds everywhere: new nationalisms, new xenophobias, new religious radicals, new community demands and so on."¹ The philosopher warns us of a contradiction: humanity faces the same dangers but, instead of uniting, it is divided by

¹ Francis Wolff, *Plaidoyer Pour l'Universel* (Paris: Fayard Editions, 2019), 11-12.

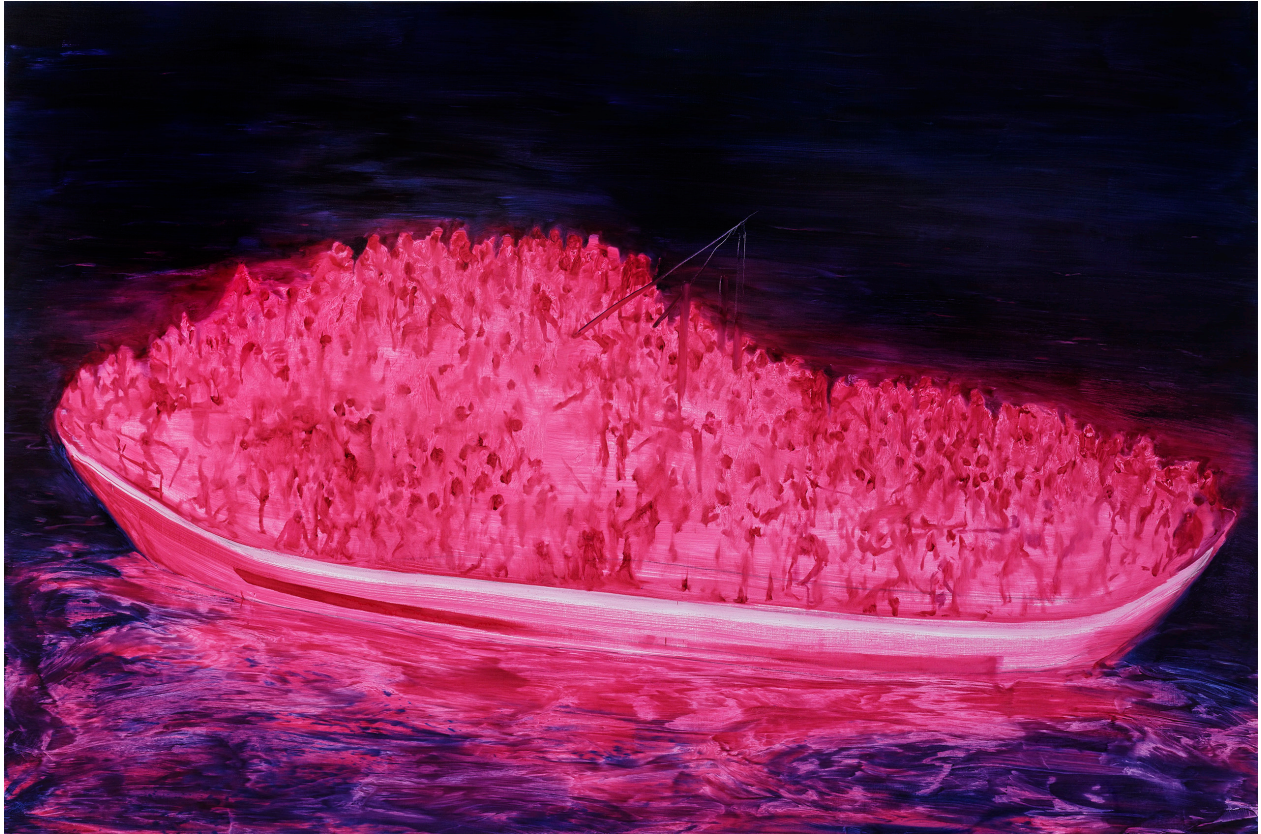


Figure 6. Xie Lei, *Challenge*, 2015, oil on canvas, 200 x 300 cm.



Figure 7. Xie Lei, *Make A Line*, 2011, oil on canvas, 200 x 320 cm, private collection, Switzerland.



Figure 8. Xie Lei, *Touching The Shadow*, 2015, oil on canvas, 180 x 200 cm.

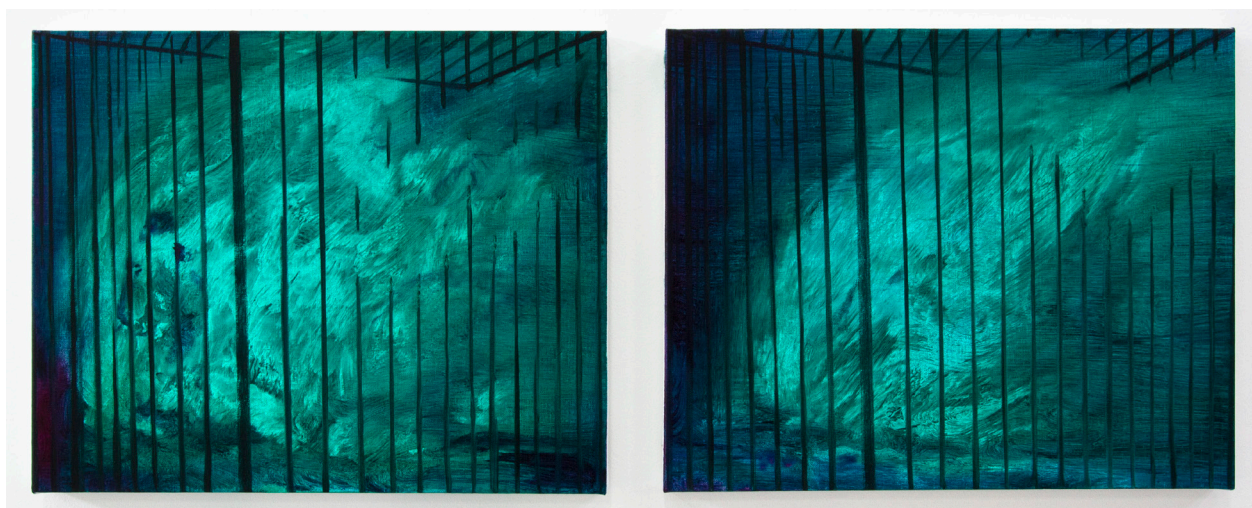


Figure 9. Xie Lei, *Vanishing*, 2015, oil on canvas, diptych, each 33 x 41 cm, private collection, London.

the choice of its representations, by a desire to limit the circulation of images, to reserve their use to categories classified according to an exclusive identity, based on race, religion, gender. This paradox has led to many discussions and incidents in cultural life in recent years, in France and elsewhere.

I will take the 2017 incident at the Whitney Biennial in New York as an example. At the opening, African American artists demand the takedown and even destruction of this painting by Dana Schutz, *Open Casket*. They accuse its author, a white artist, of “cultural appropriation”, of having appropriated a part of the history of black Americans, of their suffering, of having used a symbolic image of the Civil Rights for commercial gain and personal glory, while she does not belong to the black community and, as a white woman, in fact represents the oppressors.

Accordingly, as a Chinese artist, should I only be interested in Chinese images from Chinese culture? Let’s be more precise. As you know, China is a vast country. I belong to the Han ethnic group, so should I also refrain from taking an interest in the Tibetan, the Uyghur, the Mongol, the Manchu? What a withdrawal, what cultural self-sufficiency, imposed by those who set themselves up as owners, as legatees of images. Shouldn’t artists, in fact, take distance, step back from the subject of their work, and therefore get out of the prism of a community? As I said earlier, the particularity can intrigue me in an image, but it is the universal that will hold me. As a human being, I consider that my identity is mixed, multiple, shifting. As an artist I become even more part of the universal. Because, and I will quote Francis Wolff again, “the universal remains the only end of all struggles against inequality and domination.”²

Let’s go back to *Open Casket*, the painting and its source image. For this painting, Dana Schutz was inspired by an image that was historically widely circulated and became the icon of a fight: the photograph showing the cruelty of racism in Mississippi

in 1955, the torture and the murder of Emmett Till, a 14-year-old black teenager. During Emmett’s funeral, his mother insisted that the coffin be left open so that everyone could see the barbarity. A jury of 12 men, all white, would acquit the murderers, two white men.

Dana Schutz painted *Open Casket* in 2016, after a violent summer in the United States, marked by the killings of African Americans by white police officers, and huge protests that the current situation in this country recalls. Let’s look at *Open Casket*, a small canvas (99 x 135 cm) that does not play on the spectacular. Dana Schutz did not exactly reproduce the photograph, which had become historic. She did not use it literally, which would have been open to criticism. Her pictorial language is faithful to that which she usually handles, where the faces are already unstructured, the strongly expressionist compositions, the bright colors, while the photographs of Emmett Till were in black and white. For comparison, take *Michael Jackson’s Autopsy*, a large painting sized 152 x 274 cm, created in 2005, 11 years before *Open Casket*, or *Pachyderm*, an earlier self-portrait of the artist.

Some artists, for example, Parker Bright, claimed that “Dana Schutz has nothing to say to the black community about black drama,”³ while Hannah Black said “It is not acceptable for a white person to transmute black suffering into profit and fun.”⁴ Faced with these attacks, Dana Schutz had to justify herself. “The painting was never for sale and never will be. I did not know if I could make this painting, ethically or emotionally.”⁵ She said, “I don’t know what it is like to be black in America but I do know what it is like to be a mother. Emmett was Mamie Till’s only son . . . My engagement with this image was through empathy with his mother.”⁶ She added: “It is easy

² *Le Monde*, October 20, 2019. Roger-Pol Droit, Francis Wolff: “Il est urgent de refonder les Lumières”. https://www.lemonde.fr/livres/article/2019/10/20/francis-wolff-il-est-urgent-de-refonder-les-lumieres_6016226_3260.html

³ *The Washington Post*, March 23, 2017. Caitlin Gibson, *A white artist responds to the outcry over her controversial Emmett Till painting*. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/arts-and-entertainment/wp/2017/03/23/dana-schutz-responds-to-outcry-over-her-controversial-emmett-till-painting/>

⁴ *Ibid*

⁵ *Ibid*

⁶ *The New York Times*, March 21, 2017. Randy Kennedy, *White Artist’s Painting of Emmett Till at Whitney Biennial Draws Protests*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/21/arts/design/painting-of-emmett-till-at-whitney-biennial-draws-protests.html>

for artists to self-censor, to convince yourself to not make something before you even try.”⁷

Open Casket, for me, is a striking painting that, in the end, can only encourage the spectator to want to know more about its origins, to discover a racist murder of which they might not have been aware. Only seven years after the event, in 1962, the song *The Death of Emmett Till*, was composed by Bob Dylan and recorded by Joan Baez the following year. At the time, no one accused the two white musicians of “cultural appropriation”.

⁷ *The Washington Post*, January 29, 2018. Sebastian Smee, *For Dana Schutz, a new show after her controversial painting of Emmett Till*. https://www.washingtonpost.com/entertainment/museums/for-dana-schutz-a-new-show-after-her-controversial-painting-of-emmett-till/2018/01/29/779330f6-02af-11e8-bb03-722769454f82_story.html